

# INTERSCHOLASTIC DEBATING

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE

## Schoolmasters' Association

OF

New York and Vicinity,

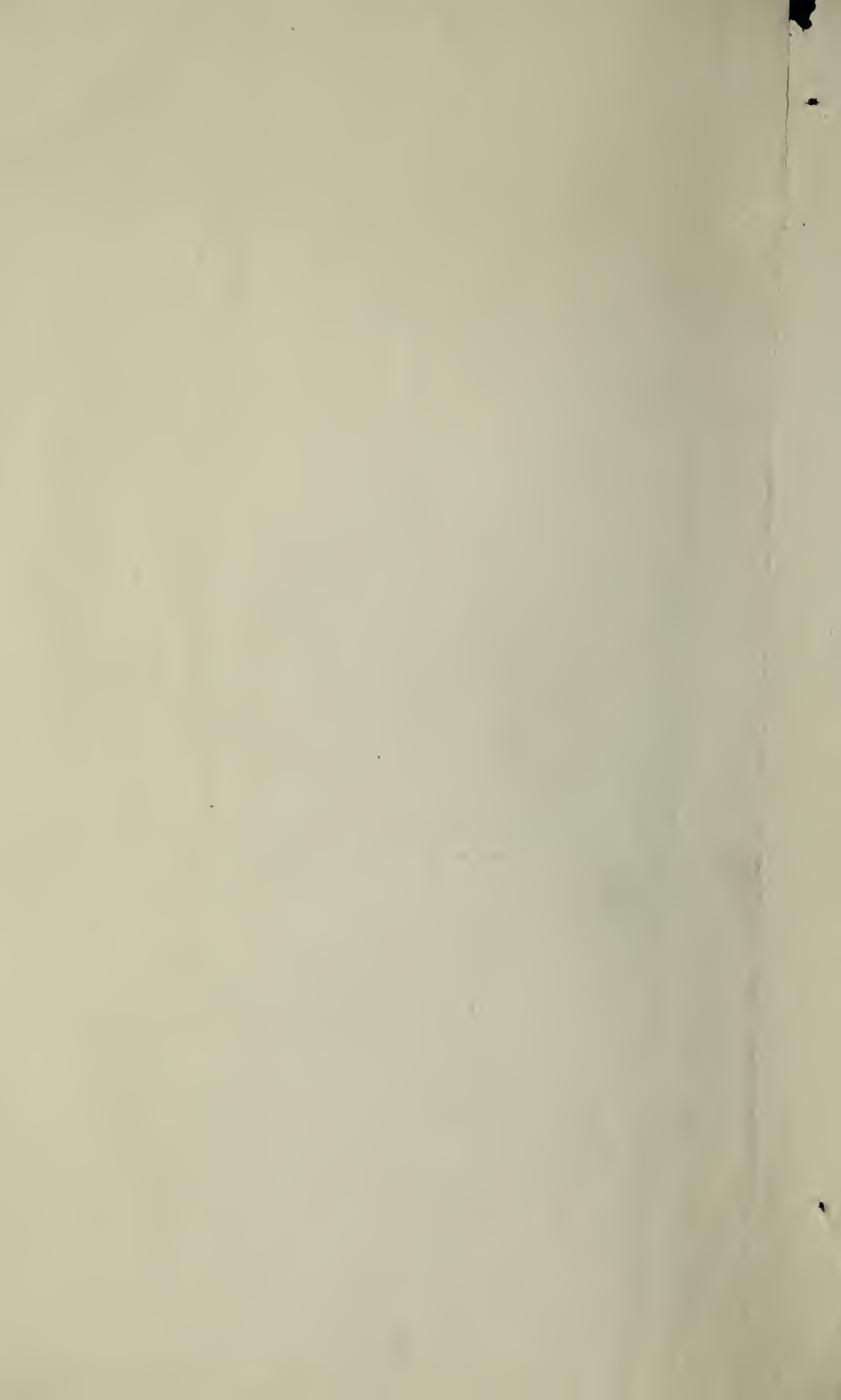
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BY

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INTERSCHOLASTIC DEBATING.

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Of the three primary forms of public speaking in schools—declamation, oration, and debate—the most difficult to teach and the most fruitful in results is debating. Declamation is crystalized manner, oration is crystalized thought, while debating is the exhibition of thought in action. Declamation of another's thoughts secures self-possession before an audience; the delivery of one's own composition gives a confident grasp of one's own faculties; while in a real debate, involving rebuttal of arguments just pronounced, we have a wonderful combination of living matter and manner—an epitome of the coming struggles of actual life. The element of originality is prominent in this most practical form of public speaking, which lays the foundation not only for after dinner addresses but for the ability to meet an emergency, to fill a vacancy, and even to converse in the presence of a group of listeners with ease and effectiveness.

My beloved senior professor of Greek at Amherst, the lamented William S. Tyler, who was equally dear to my father, told us that a liberal education comprised each of three elements: discipline of mind, acquisition of knowledge, and expression of thought. No two of these are complete. Not only must a liberally educated man express others' thoughts and his own carefully prepared thoughts, but he must be ready to meet intelligently and on the spot the expression of others' thoughts. Practice in debating is peculiarly conducive to this important part of a liberal education.

Interscholastic debating is the child of intercollegiate debating. Like glee clubs, orchestras, school papers, and Greek letter societies, it is an imitation or a reflex of the activities of higher education. This is only an illustration of the great truth that education works *down from the top*. The State universities

in the West, for example, have set the standard for high schools, and these, in turn, for all the grades of elementary education. So it is with this form of mental activity. If a boy knows he has a chance for distinction in debating while in college, he wishes to learn how to debate now that he may do better hereafter, and our city secondary schools will not maintain their supremacy in the colleges unless they furnish opportunities for development along all legitimate lines. Though myself a college fraternity man, I have been skeptical about the utility of fraternities in high schools, believing that at that early age the caste spirit is likely to influence too strongly; but, irrespective of such individual apprehensions, the fact that fraternities exist in universities seems to be a prevailing reason for their appearance in high schools, and our part is to guide all these forms of activity towards the best possible preparation for real life.

Just here let me suggest that perhaps the usual objections to interscholastic debating are not well founded and that the indifference of many teachers is not intelligent. I believe that, carefully analyzed, objections are usually due to unfortunate occurrences which should have been avoided. A miscarriage of justice in awarding a decision, due to incompetent judges, has filled with disgust participants and auditors alike. Lack of preparation has resulted in a distressing exhibition on the part of a side or of an individual which has distorted sympathy and discouraged future effort. Unintelligent applause from belligerent supporters, putting a premium on striking attitudes, sallies of cheap wit, and blustering repartee in preference to convincing, unassuming argumentation has obscured in some minds the educational value of this training in logical expression.

My contention is this. Careful superintendence of debating by interested instructors may remove the occasion for opposition or indifference and will arouse a large share of general interest in this form of intellectual gymnastics. Debating is to the various forms of mental competition what football is to athletics. Prize speaking may be compared to baseball, but it is in debating that we feel the close quarters, the rough and tumble, the grappling and tackling, all in sportsmanlike manner, of the absorbing game on the gridiron. When we think of the lavish expenditure of time and money to make the heels of students do

their best, we wonder that so many fail to see the value of making their heads do their best. Is brawn more worthy of development than brain? How can schools and teachers take so deep an interest in interscholastic athletics and actually oppose any form of interscholastic mental contest! I can understand such an attitude on the part of Jeffries or Fitzsimmons, but not on the part of a teacher or of a principal.

What then will produce greater interest in the football of an intellectual competition most true to the experiences of after life? The answer is, Careful preparation in each school. When a school is willing to be beaten it may learn how to deserve to win. Peter the Great, driven before Charles XII. of Sweden at Narva, learned how to win later on at Poltava.

A defeat will reveal weakness to be in turn remedied by careful training and probably succeeded by victory. I am not aware that the youthful Commercial High School of Brooklyn has as yet gained distinction in interscholastic debating, but its interest in a semi-annual tournament indicates ultimate success over other schools. Let me outline its method as persisted in for the past two years. Each term the four rooms of the senior class have a championship series consisting of six debates at fortnightly intervals in the presence of the school. Each room debates with the other three in succession. In each room twelve representatives are elected by ballot to form three teams of three speakers with one alternate or substitute. The three boys receiving the highest number of votes act as captains or leaders of the teams. The class teacher acts as coach. One team chooses the question and its opponent chooses the side. The three teams are of equal weight in the estimation of the class and the voting is rational because of the emulation between rooms. Seldom does a substitute get a chance to speak. Not only is it an honor to represent the room, but a mark for the debate is allowed in place of that for one formal composition. A schedule is prepared, teams are elected, questions selected, and sides arranged for the entire term. This schedule is gazetted within the first month and it is strictly carried out. Three judges—teachers, and teachers know how to mark—are appointed for the entire series and all know they are bound by the following rules:



A maximum of ten credits shall be given each captain for his opening statement of the issue joined, and of the limitations of the question.

A maximum of ten credits shall be given each speaker for argument, refutation, and presentation respectively.

By argument is meant direct proof of the position taken.

By refutation is meant either the answering of anticipated objections or the rebuttal of advanced opposing arguments.

By presentation is meant the dignity and ease of bearing, and the force and gracefulness of expression.

The maximum of credits possible for either team from one judge is one hundred.

Each judge shall thus on a scale of ten record his judgment ten times for each side and cast his vote for the side making the higher aggregate.

Only the aggregate marks of all the judges shall be announced with the decision.

The order of debate is as follows:

Captains are allowed two minutes to open and five minutes to close the debate for their sides.

Associates are allowed four minutes each.

A minute's warning is to be given each speaker.

The entire debate is completed thus in thirty minutes. Then the school proceeds to sing, and the timekeeper collects the ratings from the three judges, who by no means confer with one another, notes the comparative results and hands the decision to the principal. After making such comments as seem appropriate and encouraging, the principal announces that the judges have decided for the affirmative, or for the negative, by a unanimous vote, or by a vote of two to one as the case may be, and then he gives the aggregate number of points made by either side; as, for example, 216 to 195 out of the possible 300 according to the rules. No one speaker is commended at the expense of the others, but there is the keenest zest in maintaining an even contest. By preserving the detailed markings, at the end of the series the team or the speaker who has made the best record in argument, in refutation, or in presentation, or in all three, may easily be ascertained and announced. Thirty-six different pupils thus in a semester have the benefit of participation in one public

test. In this way a large number may gain consciousness of strength, and material is also being provided for a more severe contest with some other institution.

In schools which do not have enough rooms of one grade for a championship series, such a series may be arranged between grades, and in smaller schools, between any groups of pupils. In the school mentioned, literary and debating societies are organized in each grade under the direction of an English teacher, co-operating with the committees of the respective societies. In these societies those who excel in extemporaneous speaking become generally known, so that the election of representatives of the senior rooms is fully as satisfactory as any selections possibly made by the teachers.

As I am not familiar with interscholastic debating conducted between private or public schools in Manhattan and the Bronx you will pardon me for confining my illustrations to the efforts in this direction in the Borough of Brooklyn. The original Debating Society of the Boys' High School was the Kappa Alpha founded in 1892. In the next four years "many were the debating clubs which waxed and waned," to quote from "The Red and Black," our school annual, prominent among which were the "Philomathian," "Irving," "Thomas Jefferson," and "Hamilton" societies. Such was the condition of the debating interest in the school when, in 1896, the progressive Polytechnic Institute took the initiative in organizing the Long Island Interscholastic Debating League. The organization of the Boys' High School Debating Society was coincident with the formation of the League. "The Long Island Interscholastic Debating League" offered, in 1896, a silver cup to the school that should first win the championship for three successive years. In the three years following the Boys' High School lost but one debate out of twelve, and the cup now forms one of the adornments in our "trophy-case." Up to the present time this High School has lost three out of eighteen debates in the six years of Dr. Mickleborough's administration. In 1900, Erasmus Hall High School, the youthful Hercules which during the preceding year had joined the League, swept everything before it and won the championship for that year not only by defeating every other school in the League but, in each contest, by a unanimous vote

of the judges. The other two defeats administered to the Boys' High School were by a brilliant team from Pratt Institute, who won on both sides of the question, "Resolved, That United States Senators should be elected by direct popular vote."

As a fair sample of the kind of questions regularly selected by the League delegates I will read the questions debated by this school.

Resolved, That

The Raines Law is a benefit to New York State.

The advantages of the jury system outweigh its evils.

Hawaii should be annexed to the United States.

The disarmament of European nations would be a benefit to civilization.

A State Board for control of police in cities of the first and second class would be an improvement over local boards.

The Hay-Pauncefote Treaty as originally submitted to the Senate should be ratified.

Home Rule should be given to Ireland.

Trusts should be prohibited.

United States Senators should be elected by popular vote.

The members of the cabinet should have a seat and voice, but no vote, in Congress.

United States Senators should be elected by direct popular vote.

Cuba should be annexed to the United States.

All immigrants over sixteen years of age should be able to read and write in some language.

The partition of China would be a benefit to civilization.

Municipalities should own and operate public franchises.

The single tax would be an improvement upon the present system of taxation.

Ireland should have Home Rule.

The primary method of nomination for municipal, county, and State legislative officials would be preferable to the present system of nomination by convention.

The first six of these questions were discussed with the Brooklyn Polytechnic, the next five with Pratt Institute, the next four with Adelphi Academy, and the last three with Erasmus



Hall High School. In eight of the eighteen debates the Boys' High School maintained the affirmative of the proposition agreed upon by the League delegates.

As the speaker has been one of several who have shared in the guidance of this work and sincerely wishes to promote this cause, he will freely describe the process by which these results have been accomplished. By looking up the printed records he finds that twenty-eight different boys have participated in these eighteen debates: eleven in one public debate, nine in two each, seven in three, and one in four. Six boys were on winning teams three times. It is a well known fact that the boys who have shared in these debates are able to think on their feet and it would be interesting, if possible, to follow the career of a large number of these representative speakers in all the schools.

We have seen how the organization of a League started debating societies into life. It is also true that success leads to the organization of other societies. The Junior Debating Society subsequently organized in the Boys' High School and confined to the lower grades has more members than the senior society, for which it will furnish better material as the interest deepens.

The first important step in preparation for a debate with another institution is the selection of the participants. The method of this has been an evolution. At first a trial debate before the three teachers who are elected by the Debating Society to act on its executive committee, and as judges and trainers, determined the three speakers. Of late years six have been chosen by vote of the three judges from all comers in a trial discussion where either side might be presented. In the latest competition held for places these six were arranged alphabetically and then divided into two sets to discuss a week later the two sides of the question. The first and fourth of the six acted as leaders and thus spoke twice, or "summed up" for their sides. The sets were then turned about to discuss the opposite side of the question, and the second and the fifth acted as captains. The third and sixth then drew lots for choice of side or first choice of associate. After these three trials each judge decided separately on the three he would select and, comparing lists, the team was finally chosen, the remaining three agreeing to debate against the regular team to afford them practice. After one contest the

second three were excused and careful work on the allotted side was taken up. No boy was allowed to write out and memorize his arguments but the teachers would point out fallacies and sophistries in his reasoning. A fundamental injunction is, Find the strongest point your opponent can bring to bear and find an answer for it. The direct arguments were divided between the speakers, each having a line to develop which would prove cumulative. The boy weakest in rebuttal was assigned a place after the leader, so that the third might have more opportunity to refute, while the leader in his second speech was to demolish any opposing arguments advanced which had slipped the attention of his colleagues and then close with a powerful summary of all the points on his side.

To illustrate concretely the kinds of problems which would arise, I will mention an instance in 1897 when the question was, "Resolved, That Hawaii should be annexed to the United States." We had the affirmative, and the team dreaded the final ten minutes when the negative would have the last word. We talked it over and decided to make the first speech more than balance the last. We felt sure the negative would offer an alternative to annexation for Hawaii and that it would be a protectorate. The boys studied up Samoa's experience with a protectorate, and when the question was stated our clever leader offered in his first ten minutes the possible alternative and riddled it completely. It worked like a charm. The boy had stolen their thunder. The carefully prepared statement sounded tame after it had already been effectively stated and discounted, and the verdict was unanimously for the affirmative. In the Yale-Princeton debate on the same question the negative won by unanimous vote, which seemed to show that it is not the side that wins but the way in which the arguments are presented.

It is impossible to describe the keen enthusiasm which pervades these mental contests. To a lover of youth it is delightful to watch the alertness of opposing teams, to note that peculiar aggressiveness and dash which only boys seem to have. Now and then a boy hugs the shore, but most of them will strike out boldly into the ocean of argument or rejoinder and they thus get more safely to their desired haven. It is easy to see which teams make set speeches and which analyze their problem as

they would a game of chess. The value to pupils of a critical study of both sides of live questions cannot be overestimated. Simply to appreciate the fact that there are two sides is an important lesson.

But to conclude. When we think of the enthusiasm of pupils along the purely physical side in all forms of athletic sports we wonder if there may not be the same zest in mental struggles. Teachers and principals have great influence in popularizing the various forms of public speaking. If more educators were enthusiastic about interscholastic debating there would be deeper interest in oratory, and when there is a more solid and working appreciation of one form of public speaking there will be wider interest in composition and in declamation. We leave all these matters too much to the elocution teacher. The common English teacher may interest his pupils in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Julius Caesar* by putting a premium on successful presentation of scenes before their classmates and the true elocution teacher will be grateful for any such assistance he may receive.

What has been said indicates belief in the value of organization to further public speaking in schools. Encouragement of one form of expression tends to promote other forms. Now that the various boroughs of our city are being welded into a mighty system it is to be hoped that a Metropolitan League for the Promotion of Public Speaking may be formed, or a Metropolitan High School Debating League, or a Metropolitan Oratorical Association. Many beneficial results have already come through the co-operation of the members of the Schoolmasters' Association. Possibly sometime in the future this body may deem it wise through a committee or as individuals to consider more carefully than we can here and now how an impulse may successfully be given throughout this city to all the best forms of thought expression.



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